



Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College
and the University of Maine



The United States and the Arab World

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Key Insights:

- Anti-Americanism has reached an exceptionally high level in the Arab World due to differences in policy and U.S. assertiveness in the Arab World.
- Anti-U.S. sentiment is expected to grow dramatically from its current high levels if Iraq is invaded and especially if Iraq is occupied by U.S. forces.
- A variety of Arab and Muslim countries will find it politically impossible to cooperate with the U.S. in the aftermath of an invasion of Iraq and especially in the event of a long war.
- The U.S. will also need a viable exit strategy which allows U.S. occupation troops to be extricated as soon as possible.
- The United Nations may play an especially important part in facilitating a post-war authority that replaces a U.S. occupation.
- If the conflict with Iraq can be addressed short of war, such a solution will benefit U.S. allies in the region and help prevent a long-term breach between the U.S. and Arab World.

A conference entitled “The United States and the Arab World,” cosponsored by the U.S. Army War College and the University of Maine and attracting more than 200 academic, military, and government attendees, was held October 19-20, 2002. This conference was organized by the University of Maine’s International Affairs Program and the William S. Cohen Center for International Policy. Over 20 area experts participated in this forum, presenting papers on topics ranging from Arab public opinion/perception of the U.S., socio-economic roots of Islamic radicalism, U.S. military-security policies, and possible consequences of a U.S. confrontation with Iraq.

Panelists represented a diverse group of institutions, such as Kuwait University, Oxford University, University of Chicago, Harvard University, University of California at Santa Cruz, Boston University, Council on Foreign Relations, as well as the National Defense University and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Several government officials from the Departments of Defense and State and the military were among the presenters. The following is a summary of the presentations.

In the first panel entitled “Arab Public Perception of the United States,” one expert quoted from a recent survey of public opinion in the Arab world. That survey found most Arabs dislike the U.S. not for reasons often cited by American officials—a rejection of Western democracy and values—but rather due to policies pursued by the U.S. The survey questioned 3,200 people in eight Arab countries. The results indicated that Arabs list among their own wishes such Western notions as personal freedom and equal rights for women. The results, according to the experts, dispelled the idea of a unified “Arab street,” not only as a “derogatory” way of referring to Arab public opinion, but also ignoring differences by country, age group, gender, education. On the issue of Arab views of other countries, only Israel, the U.S., and Britain received overall negative scores among 13 countries listed in the question, including Asian and Islamic nations. The negative sentiment was highest in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with 87 percent saying they have an unfavorable impression of the U.S. The figure was 76 percent in Egypt and 61 percent in Jordan. The best scores

for the United States were in Kuwait where 48 percent said they had an unfavorable impression. Forty-one percent viewed America favorably— compared to only 12 percent in Saudi Arabia.

Several scholars referred to various polls to emphasize their argument that majority Arab opinion does not represent an overall anti-Western bias. France and Canada were among countries getting the highest ratings, with France receiving a no less than 50 percent favorable rating from all respondents. “It is a question of policy,” several experts at the conference emphasized, referring to the recent U.S. stand on Iraq and what Arabs have long regarded as an American bias in favor of Israel. According to one scholar:

The conflict over Israel brings out some of the worst stereotypes that Arabs and the United States hold of each other. Arabs see the Bush administration as a captive of the Israel lobby and the Christian right and utterly insensitive to the suffering of Palestinians. They complain about President Bush’s public praise for Sharon as “a man of peace” and the administration’s perceived slowness in deploring violence against Palestinian civilians.

Noting that Arabs share many values with the West, one prominent scholar who has done extensive field research in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait mentioned that most of the population in these countries rate personal and civil rights as the first or second priority, and he has learned from his experience that: “Arabs, like people all over the world, are focused on matters close to home. . . . Arabs don’t go to bed at night thinking about politics, but like everybody in the world, they think about their children and their future.”

However, confronted by American plans for Iraq, people in the Arab world are facing more than just the prospect of war. They now must consider the possibility that the American government, backed by its military, may exert daily administrative control over a swath of Arab soil for a long period. The idea summons up angry emotions in a region where sensitivities about the colonial past run deep. According to one scholar, “An American occupation of

Iraq would feed into a sense of humiliation felt by many Arabs. . . . People are worried about the continued sense of degradation and humiliation that they are subjected to, just sitting around watching Americans and Israelis do whatever they want in the region.” Such sentiments give rise to talk that the U.S. and Israel are seeking to redraw the map of the Middle East, perhaps dividing up Saudi Arabia, or sending the Palestinians from the occupied territories to Jordan. “It’s a hallucinatory perspective,” argued another expert.

Consequences of a War with Iraq .

Many of the analysts gathered for this conference thought that military intervention in Iraq was unwise or that the difficulties of managing such an invasion and post-war occupation were being widely underestimated by the current advocates of preemptive war. A key exception to these concerns called for intervention, not because of any perceived threat to the United States, but to liberate an oppressed people. This “optimistic” portrayal was criticized by other experts, noting that one should not ignore Iraq’s deep internal divisions and the absence of institutions that protect human rights and the rule of law. We should also be wary of projecting our rosy images upon the Middle East region. Of course, any intervention, for cause noble or otherwise, will leave the U.S. responsible for putting Iraq back together. None of the gathering advocated “nation building” in Iraq as a sensible project, certainly not for the U.S.

The following summarizes the points made during presentations, as well as questions/answers:

- War with Iraq is likely to result in the deaths of many thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians; these casualties will be exceptionally well-reported in the independent Arab media with considerable hostile commentary.
- War carries a high risk of the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Saddam Hussein. By attacking him to

prevent his future attacks, the U.S. would remove his motive for restraint. This observation was made by several experts who pointed to the deep inconsistency in the case for war.

- War will lead to substantial regional instability and increased support for al-Qaidah.

- The United States has sufficient forces to ensure regime destruction, but the regime's replacement by occupying forces or by a client regime, even if the war is not greatly destructive, should be expected to increase regional opposition to the U.S. presence. It is likely, in particular, to increase support for organizations such as al-Qaida and to prove counterproductive to peace and stability in the region.

One respected military analyst talked about how the U.S. might fight the war, and how the Saddam Hussein regime might respond. He concluded that:

- The regime will aim to draw the U.S. forces into urban warfare in Baghdad. A civilian death toll of at least 10,000 is possible. This may even be a low estimate as the experience of urban warfare in Beirut and elsewhere suggests even higher casualties;

- Evidence of Iraqi military tactics in 1991 shows that the survival of the regime is the core policy, and that chemical and biological weapons are almost certain to be used against attacking troops and possibly against targets in neighboring countries. One expert raised the possibility that severe casualties arising from Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons could result in a nuclear response.

- A pro-American regime in Baghdad would be seen across the region as a puppet government through which the U.S. seeks to control Iraq's oil, currently four times the size of total U.S. oil reserves, including Alaska. Even one expert who supported the war with Iraq agreed that "the U.S. invasion and occupation will trigger anti-American protests outside Iraq and raise the risk of terrorist attacks against our forces, nationals, and interests." Nevertheless, according to this expert, "the

reaction will be different inside Iraq, because the destructive force of 30 years of Saddam's rule has been great and because Iraqis will feel that, left to their own devices, they will face a bleak future marked by the factional coups attempts and military intervention that have marked most of Iraq's history."

On the question of how the war with Iraq would affect other countries in the region, particularly Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, experts offered the following assessments:

- Pakistan will be extremely worried about the U.S. getting distracted from the subcontinent, central Asia and Afghanistan. The possibility exists that this war will encourage extremists within that region and within their own country to react by targeting government installations.

- Iran in many ways is a special case. Several experts dealt with Iran's role in this conflict. A consensus emerged that few Iranians have forgotten or forgiven the devastation of the 8-year war with Iraq. Iranians today are less certain than they were in 1980 of the potential for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution in Iraq. In the past several months, Iranian officials abroad have contacted Americans discreetly to pass the message that Iran has no intention of supporting Iraq in a war with the United States and would like Washington to consult it about plans for a post-Saddam government before attacking Iraq. Moreover, these Iranians claim that Tehran would prefer a conservative government in Iraq that would be able to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity and keep the country from dissolving into civil war. While this is probably short-term thinking, the political grid-lock in Iran and continual debate over dialogue with the U.S. continue to rage, despite official hard-line efforts to damp it. If the U.S. is to be tied down in peacekeeping and nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, it can ill-afford to confront a hostile Iran.

- For Jordan and Egypt, if the war is drawn out, public reactions are going to be extremely dangerous for both regimes and

may present significant problems in their abilities to support and deal with problems that may emerge from their own publics.

- Saudi Arabia will support the U.S. They are going to have a lot of difficulty with the decision to go in, unless a clear case is made.

It will help in all these countries that a clear U.N. resolution supports this; they can do it in the name of the U.N. In all cases, the biggest problem is going to be internal. The images that come back and burn across the region are going to decide the greatest problems that each of these countries is going to have to deal with, noted one expert.

Conclusion.

The majority of the participants agreed that, whatever the military outcome of an attack on Iraq, a significant risk of grave complications exists, not least in terms of promoting the very security threats that the U.S. seeks to prevent, i.e., terrorism and WMD. One speaker emphasized how little scholars and policy analysts really know about the political dynamics of Iraq. He contrasted the case of Iran 25 years ago and noted that we knew much more about Iran but still failed miserably in anticipating the course of events. His conclusion: We should approach Iraq with profound awareness of our ignorance. None of the participants doubted that the U.S. could topple Saddam Hussein's regime, but many were concerned about America's capacity to impose its will on Iraq over the long term.

The potential occupation of Iraq was widely viewed as a more difficult challenge than defeating Saddam. The extreme sensitivity of the Middle Eastern region to any signs of Western domination will place a special burden on the U.S. to withdraw from any sort of occupation authority as quickly as possible. There may also be a special need to involve fully the U.N. in any rebuilding effort, even if such efforts are primarily U.S. funded. Finally, a frequently expressed view was that both assertive American policy and regional

trends in the Arab world will continue to nourish the roots of Islamist radicals.

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